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Art Fund was set up to help museums acquire works of art and share them with the public, and we have been doing this for nearly 120 years. Thanks to the support of our 135,000 National Art Pass members and supporters, we help enrich the UK's museum and gallery collections, so that as many people as possible can access and enjoy them.

As well as giving grants for the acquisition of artworks – whether historical or contemporary – we support museums and galleries to commission new work too. Commissioning art is an important way for museums and galleries to engage communities and keep their collections relevant and dynamic.

One commission we're very proud to have funded is an ambitious work by the Turner Prize-nominated artist Heather Phillipson for *Art Night* in Dundee, titled 'Dream Land'. Inspired by historical wildlife documentary footage unearthed from BBC Archives, the artist has created a new video work reimagining the biodiversity of UK wildlife in a landscape no longer dominated by humans.

Phillipson developed the work this spring with primary school children in Dundee through a series of workshops at The McManus: Dundee's Art Gallery & Museum, inspiring young people to respond creatively to the threat our environment is facing. 'Dream Land' is

also part of *The Wild Escape*, the largest ever collaboration between the UK's museums, inspiring children to visit museums and imagine a better future for the wildlife on our doorstep.

Today, artists are not confined by material or medium. Their work can be performative or ephemeral or a 30-minute film: an experience rather than an object on a plinth. This is art that is not so easy to display or to collect. Yet it is indisputably part of the canon, and therefore belongs in museums. Indeed, a museum often provides the physical and temporal space to show and interpret such work.

We applaud *Art Night* for generously gifting 'Dream Land' to The McManus' permanent collection where it will continue to engage audiences and raise awareness around biodiversity loss, leaving a legacy of both *Art Night* and *The Wild Escape* in Scotland for years to come.

The funding we've awarded museums and galleries towards new commissions in recent years shows the diversity and scope of artists' ambitions, and the impact a new commission can have. A new body of work from Ashish Shah celebrates Indian culture and challenges Western perspectives of fashion photography in an innovative way at the William Morris Gallery in London as part of *Be More Tender* (until

10 September).

And Nalini Malani's monumental video animation 'My Reality is Different', supported through the National Gallery Contemporary Fellowship with Art Fund, demonstrates the power our public collections have to inspire new work by interrogating and challenging the famous paintings in the National Gallery and the Holburne Museum in Bath through a global lens.

As diverse as these works are, the common thread is how new commissions can bring collections and cultural spaces to life and invite us to look again at art both old and new. And so it is a privilege for us to be able to support museums to carry on the tradition of commissioning artists to enrich our public institutions. I'm delighted we've been able to help bring this important new work by Heather Phillipson to life and look forward to it igniting audiences' imaginations as part of *Art Night* this summer.

Jenny Waldman is director of Art Fund, the national fundraising charity for art. Find out more at artfund.org

Heather Phillipson: Dream Land

16 June–1 July

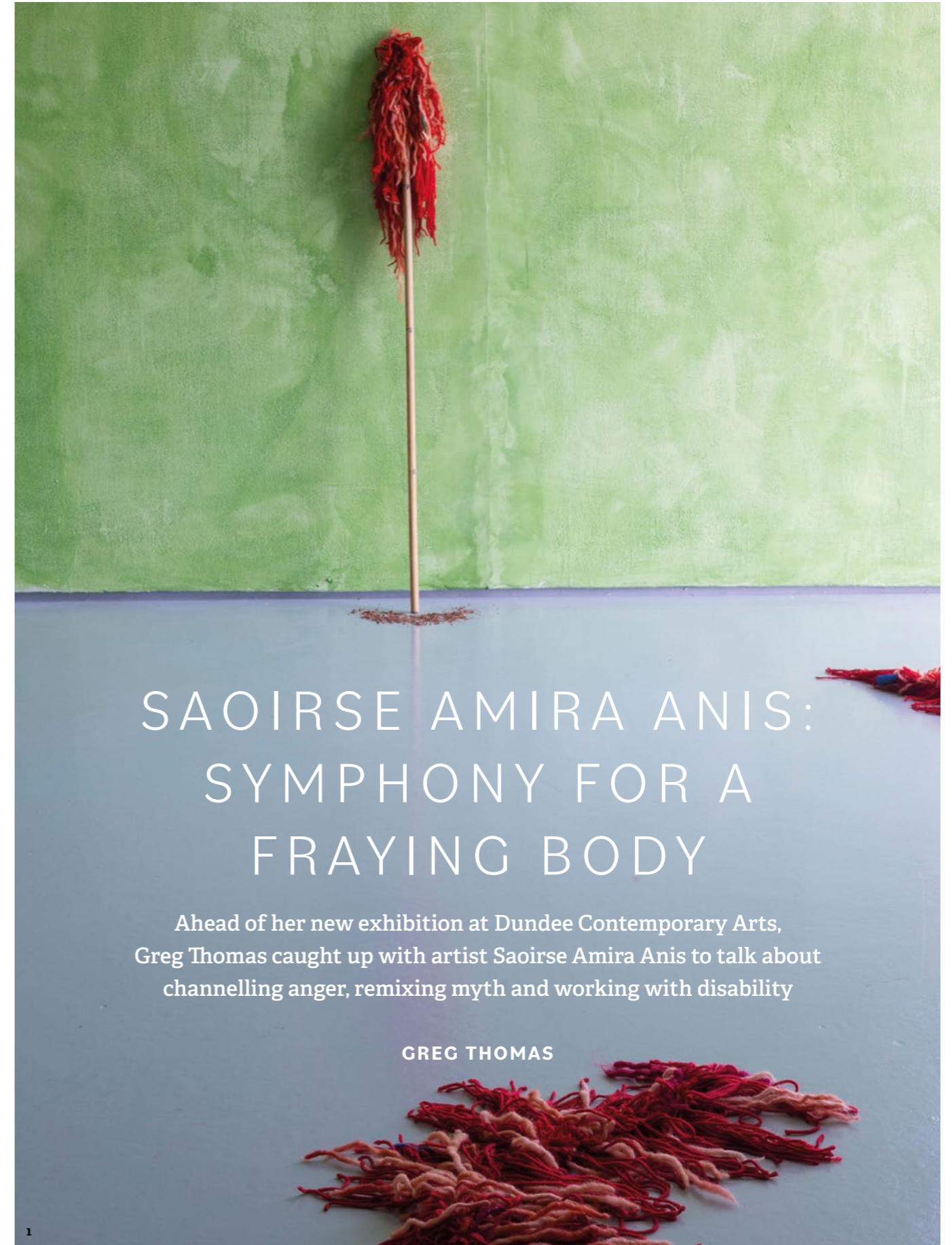
Cooper Gallery

Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art & Design, 13 Perth Road, Dundee, DD1 4HT

T: (0)1382 385330 | dundee.ac.uk/cooper-gallery

Open: Monday to Saturday noon–5pm, with a performance (Mourning Ritual) from the artist on 24 June as part of Art Night, co-commissioned with Cooper Gallery and supported by the DJCAD Centenary Trust

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Heather Phillipson,
Dream Land still. Images
courtesy of
Holly Falconer



SAOIRSE AMIRA ANIS:
SYMPHONY FOR A
FRAYING BODY

Ahead of her new exhibition at Dundee Contemporary Arts, Greg Thomas caught up with artist Saoirse Amira Anis to talk about channelling anger, remixing myth and working with disability

GREG THOMAS

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‘Costumes and personae began to be crafted that captured the spirit of both siphonophorae and, as Anis puts it, “female-coded mythological creatures that are angry and evil”

Saoirse Amira Anis' latest show, *symphony for a fraying body*, centres on a film depicting a sea monster-like creature writhing in coastal landscapes on the Black Isle peninsula. It is a grand visual spectacle evoking hybrid mythic roots and playful connections to post-humanist aesthetics. But the film and its protagonist also express some of the personal frustrations that underpin the artist's current thinking, as she explained in the run-up to the exhibition's opening.

When Anis was commissioned by DCA, the Scottish-Moroccan sculptor and filmmaker was researching forms of non-human sentience, and in particular looking into siphonophorae, an unusual order of marine organisms made up of multiple 'zoids'. These are sets of autonomous lifeforms joined together, each performing a distinct survival function (the most famous example is the Portuguese man o'war, often mistaken for a jellyfish).

Pursuing a related thread, Anis was also mining European and North African folklore, and thinking about the many female hybrid creatures across these traditions that dwell in or near



water, particularly the Moroccan djinn Aicha Kandicha. 'She's this beautiful woman with long hair, a long green dress and goat's hooves, who lives near rivers and streams, luring men to water with her beauty and then killing them.'

Costumes and personae began to be crafted that captured the spirit of both siphonophorae and, as Anis puts it, 'female-coded mythological creatures that are angry and evil'. Eventually, the various forms in her head settled into a single, unnamed creature who became the protagonist for the film, its costume a gathering of frayed and trailing homemade ropes, dyed red and orange with madder root. 'It looks like a sea creature, like a jellyfish. It's wiggly and squid-like, with big cephalopod eyes, and goat horns that I took from Aicha's goat-like feet.'

There are connections here to cross-cultural mythmaking, and the more-than-human life worlds of anthropocene aesthetics, that are in step with much contemporary artistic and political discourse, but other emotions power this new persona, too. Anis' work often channels a quality of Black, queer, disabled joy and solidarity, so it's somewhat surprising, when this thought



is put to her, to hear the Dundee-based artist describe anger as a key creative source. 'I was angry about a lot of things, and I still am. But one part of it was not being afforded empathy and leniency in situations where I knew I deserved it, and where I could see white people being afforded it.'

Anis points out the difficulty of having a majority-white friendship group and creative circle in Dundee, and having 'no pals around me who are physically disabled' (she has a chronic illness which, she says, makes physical pain and fatigue 'part of everything I do'). There was no one to mirror and validate the experience of being othered on either count, but neither did she have sufficient reserves of energy to seek out new friendships that would reflect those characteristics. So the anger fed on itself. 'It got really

bad, and I didn't know what to do with it. Because women aren't supposed to be angry, Black women in particular.'

It's not hard to see how the mythological beast dreamed up for this new commission might partly manifest frustration at being perceived as abnormal in some sense. For that reason, perhaps, Anis didn't initially see this character as one she would return to continually (unlike Freedom Princess, a joyful alter-ego who was the subject of her solo show at Cample Line last year): 'It's so tied to the specifics of this show, and to feelings of anger and unravelling, I'm not sure I could embody that again and again.'

‘This 2022 manifesto leans on Black feminist sources such as Audre Lorde to embrace the historical othering of Black women as non-human, exploring what Anis calls “the benefits of not being human, the joy and freedom of that”

But coming across Akwugo Emejulu's book *Fugitive Feminism* changed this to some extent. This 2022 manifesto leans on Black feminist sources such as Audre Lorde to embrace the historical othering of Black women as non-human, exploring what Anis calls 'the benefits of not being human, the joy and freedom of that'. Suddenly the creature made sense not only as a representation of anger but also as a source of liberation. At this point, Anis allowed the persona to become 'more entangled with myself', and it became more connected to the positive emotions also powering her practice.

So what can visitors expect when they enter DCA? 'I'm not going to think about all the details till I get into the space. But there'll hopefully be a green wash going on the walls, with Fairy Liquid in it to create this soft bubbling texture. There'll be a big semi-hexagonal sofa covered in fabric dyed with madder root and a constructed stand with a television on top showing the film, with the ropes from the costume hanging down on either side to echo the movements of the creature.'

The idea is to bring the energy and essence of the film out into the exhibition space. This concept will be taken one step further for *Art Night* on 24 June, when the artist, in character, will lead a procession down to the waters of the River Tay. A symbol of non-human joy, perhaps, and of emotional catharsis for both artist and audience.

Greg Thomas is an art writer based in Glasgow

Saoirse Amira Anis: symphony for a fraying body

Until 6 August

Dundee Contemporary Arts

152 Nethergate, Dundee, DD1 4DY

T: (0)1382 432 444 | dca.org.uk

Open: Tuesday and Wednesday, Friday to Sunday 11am–6pm, Thursday 11am–7pm

Performances on 24 June for *Art Night*
7pm: Dundee Contemporary Arts
9pm: Discovery Point to V&A
11pm: V&A to HMS Unicorn
Each performance will last 20–40 minutes

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Saoirse Amira Anis, *symphony for a fraying body*. Installation images by Ruth Clark. Images courtesy of DCA